The Indian Fashion Industry and Traditional Indian Crafts

This study documents the emergence of the high-end fashion industry in India from the mid-1980s to 2005. Drawn from oral histories, magazine articles, and several databases, the study demonstrates that the Indian fashion industry’s unique identity, based on heavily embellished traditional styles rather than innovative Western-style cuts and designs, was the result of the actions of early entrepreneurs.

Until recently, fashion was characterized as a Western phenomenon, prevalent in societies that not only encourage individuality and change but also possess the wealth to enable both factors. The leading centers of fashion in the world were found only in Western cities—Paris, London, New York, and Milan—until the addition of Tokyo in recent years. The fashion industry in each city has assumed its own distinct identity.

In this article, I describe the emergence (in the mid-1980s) and evolution of the high-end fashion industry in India. By 2005, Indian fashion had developed a clear identity and had evolved into a well-established, functioning industry, earning revenues of approximately 2 billion Indian rupees (INRs) (the equivalent of USD 61.5 million) and made up of at least two hundred individuals who self-identified as designers and were members of the industry trade association. In 2005, the Indian industry, which was largely concentrated in New Delhi, possessed

2 Christopher Breward and David Gilbert, Fashion’s World Cities (Oxford, 2006).
3 This estimate of the size of the Indian fashion industry is based on figures published in a research report from KPMG India, 2003. The apparel industry exported $6 billion worth of apparel worldwide in 2004. See “India Seen as Alternative to China” by Holly Haber, Women’s Wear Daily, 15 June 2004. In the domestic market, retail sales of apparel, which included Indian and Western brands, accounted for approximately $16 billion in 2005. See “The Great Indian Retail Story,” Ernst & Young report on Indian retail, published in 2006. Official numbers based on documents held by the Fashion Design Council of India.
the features that characterized the fashion industry in the traditional fashion centers of the world—regular presentation of designs (i.e., a Fashion Week), a flourishing media and retail presence, training institutes, and an infrastructure of supporting functions. I examine how the identity of the industry evolved as a result of the actions of early entrepreneurs. Using oral histories, magazine articles, and various databases, I show that the industry's identity—based on heavily embellished traditional styles, rather than innovative Western-style cuts and designs—was the result of the interactions of early Indian fashion entrepreneurs with their consumers.

Fashion Cities and the Identity of the Industry

The recent history of fashion has been largely examined from a sociocultural angle. According to Regina Blaszczyk, fashion, when viewed as a social system, is a "collective activity," that is, the "output of the deliberation, conflict, and negotiation within a complex network of institutions and individuals." Yet few studies of the world's main fashion industries have described their evolution in terms of the interactions among entrepreneurs, or as "negotiations" among institutions and individuals. Although there has been research on the role of fashion cities, there has been less scrutiny of the larger cultural context in which fashion industries arise.

Each national industry has a specific, well-known, and frequently asserted identity. For instance, in Paris, the industry is celebrated for its elegant workmanship and style; in London, it is known for cutting-edge chic combined with excellence in menswear and tailoring; in Tokyo, for avant-garde fashion; in Milan, for luxurious ready-to-wear apparel; and in New York, for sportswear-inspired fashion. Academics have explained both the identities of these industries and their dominance over the world of fashion by invoking the social and cultural history of the cities in which they originated. Paris, for example, was the undisputed center of fashion for two hundred years, not only because

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5 Breward and Gilbert, *Fashion's World Cities*.


the industry began there, but also because of what Valerie Steele calls a "Parisian fashion culture." This culture is due not only to Parisian designers' access to skilled craftswomen and artisans, but also to the Parisians' embrace of the designers' displays of prowess. Other scholars have analyzed Milan and New York in similar ways. Marie-Laure Djelic and Antti Ainamo describe how the sociocultural and economic contexts in Italy, France, and the United States defined the evolutionary paths and final structures of their fashion industries. With the exception of Diana Crane, however, scholars have not sufficiently attended to how the interaction of designers with their working environments has created an identity for the industry.

Indian designers' decisions and actions took place within the socioeconomic and cultural environment in India at the time. While they had to overcome certain challenges posed by their environment, they also managed to take advantage of the opportunities it offered. In this study, therefore, I will emphasize how designers working within their own context made decisions that shaped the course of industry development.

The Indian Context in the 1980s

Three aspects of the Indian apparel industry in the mid- to late 1980s were critical to its development. The first was the prevalence of rich and diverse handwoven fabrics and craftsmanship; the second was the limited appeal of Western styles of clothing to consumers, particularly for formal or festive occasions; and the third was Indian customers' easy access to affordable clothing custom made by tailors. It was in this context that the first individuals who self-identified as designers set up their enterprises in India.

India has a strong tradition of weaving diverse textiles and embellishing fabrics by dyeing, printing, embroidering, and ornamenting them with beads, mirrors, and precious metals, such as gold, silver, and

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8 Steele, *Paris Fashion*.
11 See Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*.
semiprecious stones. In fact, textiles and fabrics constituted a major portion of India's ancient trade with other civilizations. Each geographic region within India has evolved its own unique style of weaving and decorating textiles. But British rule brought with it mill-made cloth, which soon threatened to destroy traditional handloom centers. After India gained its independence from British rulers in 1947, the government of India consciously tried to preserve and revive handloom and handicraft traditions. This effort was influenced also by the political importance of khadi, handloomed fabric made from hand-spun yarn, whose use had been exhorted by Mohandas Gandhi as a way of both retaliating against British imported cloth and promoting Indian self-reliance. Supporting the handicrafts industries in India was also seen as a way to increase employment and incomes in rural areas without uprooting villagers from their familiar surroundings. Simultaneously, however, India was pursuing a policy of encouraging industrialization, which allowed it to export huge amounts of cheap manufactured cotton apparel, some surplus of which found its way into Indian stores.

Nevertheless, most Indian women did not buy garments produced in mills for export, since these tended to be Western clothes, such as shirts, trousers, and skirts. As in most Asian and other developing countries with distinctive indigenous styles of dressing, Indian men had adopted Western-style clothing on a larger scale, and earlier, than Indian women had done. Thus, women in India in the 1980s mostly

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13 Rta Kapur Chishti and Rahul Jain, Handcrafted Indian Textiles (New Delhi, 2000); John Gillow and Nicholas Barnard, Traditional Indian Textiles (New York, 1991); John Irwin and Margaret Hall, Indian Painted and Printed Fabrics (Ahmedabad, 1971); Asharani Mathur, Woven Wonder: The Tradition of Indian Textiles (New Delhi, 2002).


15 Gillow and Barnard, Traditional Indian Textiles.

16 Shuji Uchikawa, Indian Textile Industry: State Policy, Liberalization and Growth (New Delhi, 1998). Also see Tirthankar Roy, Artisans and Industrialization: Indian Weaving in the Twentieth Century (New Delhi, 1993).


18 See, for example, Mohandas Gandhi, Young India, 29 June 1921. Also see Lisa Trivedi, Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India (Bloomington, Ind., 2007).


20 Uchikawa, Indian Textile Industry.

21 Emma Tarlo, Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India (Chicago, 1996).

wore Indian-style clothes. While women living in rural areas adhered to Indian styles, city-dwelling women too demonstrated a strong preference for Indian style-clothing over Western styles. Most Indian women continued to wear the traditional Indian garb consisting of a sari (a long piece of fabric draped around the body) or salwar-kameez (a tunic worn over loose trousers) until the late 1980s. It is difficult to ascertain whether they did so out of personal preference or in conformity to prevailing social norms, since such preferences may be socially constructed. However, the wearing of Western clothes, especially by a married woman, was often perceived as an indicator of wayward and rebellious behavior.

In the mid-1980s, when the first fashion designers appeared in India, the clothing industry consisted of a combination of tailors and some scattered, unorganized retailers. Because there was no organized retail sector, women tended to go to a local tailor to have bespoke garments sewn for everyday wear. Formal occasions usually called for a sari, which itself did not require sewing, although the blouse, or choli, that went with it had to be made by a tailor. The vast array of textiles (both handloomed and mill-made) available in India meant that one could be reasonably sure that no two individuals would ever have identical clothes. Saris were an exception to this rule: when hand woven, they tended to follow traditional color combinations and patterns; otherwise, they were mass produced.

In fact, when some items of traditional Indian clothing became available off the rack, they tended to be unpopular, because women were unhappy about, and unused to, wearing the same clothes as other women. Social and economic conditions were also such that it was...
possible for a woman to spend time and effort putting an outfit together by buying fabric, taking it to a tailor, collaborating in decisions about the style, and having it embellished with embroidery if she so desired (tailors either employed skilled hand-embroiderers or used machines to embroider garments). However, since local tailors were usually not called upon to reproduce the perfect fit that Western clothing required, when women adopted Western clothes, they gradually resorted to ready-to-wear, store-bought trousers, T-shirts, and shirts. Tailors were hired when Indian clothing and sari blouses were needed. Since most women wore Indian clothing both at home and at work, this arrangement continued in an uneasy equilibrium until some stores began to sell ready-made salwar-kameez sets. Even after that happened, women who believed they had superior taste or a better sense of style, who wanted an ensemble for a special occasion, or who had atypical measurements still tended to go to tailors for custom-made Indian garments.

Small pockets of the population with the means to travel abroad, who were therefore familiar with Western designers, bought branded items. However, strong cultural norms prevented (and continue to do so to this day) most women from wearing, for instance, a tailored suit from Chanel at a wedding: appropriate dress for a wedding remains Indian.

Under these circumstances, consumers took their fashion cues mostly from Indian ("Bollywood") movies. Tailors often received requests to reproduce styles worn by popular stars in the latest movies. Clothes in movies were created by costume designers or stylists. For some reason, few costume designers took the step of starting their own fashion-design enterprises. Instead, some designers made forays into costume design for movies in later years.

The sociopolitical environment also contributed to the slow development of the fashion industry. The first government in independent India (after 1947) adopted a centrally planned approach to economic development, in which the state played a large role. The thinking of the members of both the government and the Planning Commission (which created the "Five-Year Plans" for economic development) was heavily influenced by Gandhian principles of self-reliance and equality of outcomes. The objective of the second Five-Year Plan (1956), as

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29 Tu, "Dressing the Nation."
30 For instance, one tailor said to me in an interview that he felt obliged to watch movies that were box-office hits because he knew he would have customers asking him to make "the blouse worn by [star's name] in [movie name]," or to reproduce some aspect of her clothes (like the neckline) in their garments. Interview with Rahul Awasthi, June 2006, Pune, India.
31 Interviews with fashion designers, June 2006.
The Indian Fashion Industry summarized in a section titled "The Socialist Pattern of Society," was explicitly identified not as "private profit, but [as] social gain."³³ The planning of economic development was therefore directed toward providing adequate income levels for all citizens, preventing the concentration of wealth and resources in a small portion of the population, and, above all, upholding the common good.³⁴ The state heavily taxed the populace to fund industrial development, thereby imposing "the largest possible restraint on consumption by all classes."³⁵

The outline of the first Five Year Plan, which was drafted in 1951, expressly stated that, in order to ensure availability of capital for investment, "some sacrifice of current consumption" was necessary.³⁶ Thus, a pervasive belief in the virtues of austerity was a social cause-and-effect of India's economic policy. Because these economic policies kept the levels of disposable incomes low, consumerism was not widespread, even among urban Indians.³⁷ *Femina*, a semimonthly women's magazine, carried an average of eighty-three advertisements for jewelry, cosmetics, and accessories every year between 1985 and 1989 (at an average of four advertisements per issue), compared with a yearly average of 246 from 2001 to 2005 (a threefold increase to ten advertisements per issue). The difference was not merely quantitative; the content of these advertisements changed as well. In the 1980s, advertisements for toiletries, such as soaps, shampoos, and hair oil, were the most commonly featured hygiene products, rather than color cosmetics, perfumes, or makeup, which only started to appear after 1993. It was in this social, cultural, and economic context that the first fashion designers made an appearance in India.³⁸

### The Emergence of the Fashion Industry in India

The high-end fashion industry is limited to firms that design, create, and sell (either directly to consumers, or indirectly through stores) apparel whose value is explicitly derived from its association with an individual whose creativity and craftsmanship is perceived to be embodied

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³⁷See, for example, Wilhite, *Consumption and the Transformation of Everyday Life*, 146–47.
The origins of the upscale fashion industry in India can be traced to the mid-1980s, when the first few entrepreneurs calling themselves fashion designers began to appear. Starting with these designers, an industry and broader field of fashion was built gradually. The fashion field, consisting of educational institutes, magazines, and specialized retailers (multidesigner outlets, or MDOs), emerged and evolved with the fashion industry itself.

The Fashion Designers. The first mention of designers and their boutiques appears in 1985 in the leading women's magazine at the time, Femina. Of the five earliest designers in India, one, Ritu Kumar, was the wife of a businessman in the apparel export sector; one had returned to India after being trained in apparel design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York; another, Rohit Bal, was self-trained and started his apparel career working in his brother's apparel export firm; and two, Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, were self-trained designers who also worked together. These designers established their enterprises between 1980 and 1987, and all but one of their firms were based in New Delhi. Since starting a fashion firm requires relatively low levels of initial capital, most of the early designers were either self-funded or supported by loans from friends and family. The two designers who were linked to a family export business further benefited from access to physical resources, such as workshops, as well as from connections with others operating in the apparel and textile industries. These earliest designers hailed from the middle or upper-middle class of society, unlike the tailors, who largely (though not entirely) belonged to a poorer social stratum. Many designers did not sew the garments themselves but employed tailors in their workshops. Belonging to the upper echelons was a distinct advantage to these early designers, as their personal networks often represented their source of clients.

Since fashion design was a new industry in India in the 1980s, not surprisingly most of the earliest designers identified themselves as "self-trained," since there were no fashion-design training institutes in India, and most people could not afford to go abroad to train for a profession that was not well established, or even understood, in India. However, the designers who entered the field soon after the first group, between 1987 and 1991, were almost all formally trained in apparel

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42 See Sengupta, Indian Fashion.
43 Interviews with designers, June 2006.
design at design schools in London, New York, or Paris, and many of them had even worked as apprentices in fashion firms in the West.\textsuperscript{44} Also, given the expense of design education abroad, these individuals largely belonged to the upper middle class and consequently were able to finance their enterprises with money from friends and family. After 1991, though, the industry became more democratic as individuals from a wider range of socioeconomic classes began to enter the profession, partly because they could then afford the training at the government-run National Institute of Fashion Technology, which was established in New Delhi in 1986. By the late 1990s, the fashion industry was on a firm footing, and some designers were fortunate enough to obtain corporate financial support for their enterprises.\textsuperscript{45} By this time, the broader field, too, had evolved with the industry, and, with the broader customer access that MDOs provided, designers no longer had to rely solely on their personal networks for access to potential clients.

*Training Institutes.* In 1986, the Ministry of Textiles set up India’s first education institute specifically for fashion, in New Delhi, with help and guidance from the Fashion Institute of Technology. The founding charter stipulated that the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) was supposed to support the apparel export industry by training individuals to apply the garment specifications provided by Western apparel firms. However, NIFT’s mandate was also to support and promote the existing indigenous textile-weaving and craft industries.\textsuperscript{46} A design-education institute—the National Institute of Design (NID)—established in 1968 by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce in Ahmedabad (in western India) already existed. While NID offered a program in textile design, its focus was more on industrial products than on apparel. Nevertheless, many early faculty members in NIFT were graduates of the NID textile-design program.

Other fashion-training institutes were soon set up, starting with the founding, in 1993, of the well-regarded school, the Pearl Academy of Fashion in New Delhi. The goal of this school, started by the Seth family (which ran an apparel export company), was to professionalize the apparel-export industry. By 2005, there were ninety-three institutes in various Indian cities offering at least one program in fashion (or apparel or textile) design.\textsuperscript{47} Among this number were five satellite NIFT campuses set up in other cities in response to the rising demand for fashion education. While some of these institutes were newly established exclusively as fashion-training institutes, others were older vocational

\textsuperscript{44}Sengupta, \textit{Indian Fashion.}

\textsuperscript{45}Interviews with designers, June 2006.


\textsuperscript{47}New Delhi was home to the largest proportion of these institutes; Mumbai and Chennai came in second and third, respectively.
training institutes that had added fashion design to their curricula in the 1990s. The establishment of these programs and institutes was largely due to the efforts of entrepreneurs, both within and outside existing organizations, who saw an opportunity to capitalize on the growing popularity of fashion design as a profession. NID, too, added apparel-design programs in 1998, and, in an interesting reversal, employed several NIFT graduates as instructors for these programs.

*The Media.* In 1985, when the first fashion designers established their firms, no exclusive fashion magazine existed in India. *Femina*, a relatively widely circulating semimonthly English-language women’s magazine, established in Mumbai in 1959, carried a few features and stories about clothing, in addition to typical fare about careers, relationships, and women’s issues. After the emergence of fashion designers, however, *Femina* gradually evolved into a magazine that was largely about fashion. Not only did the number of articles on the subject appearing in *Femina* steadily increase over the years, but *Femina* also began to publish a yearly compilation in its *Book of Fashion*, which featured a different fashion topic each year. Then, in 1992, *Verve*, a magazine that exclusively covered fashion, was founded. This magazine was modeled on the fashion magazines of the West, such as *Vogue*. It featured stories about new designers and clothing trends and offered style advice. Fashion magazines from the United States and Europe also entered the Indian market in the 1990s, starting with *Elle* in 1997. The entry of Western fashion magazines was prompted largely by their advertisers’ penetration of the Indian market. In 2001, Fashion TV, a twenty-four-hour-a-day television channel devoted to fashion shows from all over the world, also joined the Indian market. By 2005, there were seventeen fashion magazines in India, and *Vogue* had announced that it would start publishing an Indian edition, starting in September 2007. Between these magazines and Fashion TV, Indian consumers were kept well informed about fashion.

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48 In 2006, for instance, NIFT and NID received twelve and sixteen applications, respectively, for every available seat in their apparel-design programs, compared with eleven and twelve in 2003. Records of the NID and NIFT admissions offices.

49 *Femina* archives, Mumbai, India. The number of articles on fashion in the magazine increased from four in 1985 to sixty-three in 2005. Twenty-four issues were published each year, and each issue had approximately one hundred pages.

50 Interview with the editor Anu Iyer of *L’Officiel*, 2 Nov. 2006: “The affluent in India are on par with the wealthy elsewhere and the Western brands were starting to enter the market. So it was important for a luxury magazine like *L’Officiel* to enter the Indian market as well.”

51 The Office of the Registrar of Newspapers, India, https://rni.nic.in/about.html, accessed on various dates in July 2007. Unlike designer firms and training institutes, a nearly equal number of magazine offices existed in New Delhi and Mumbai, presumably because Mumbai was viewed as the center of media enterprises. Interview with senior executive Jonathan Newhouse at Condé Nast Publications. The first issue of *Vogue* India was published in September 2007.
Multidesigner Outlets. A final component of the fashion field was a specialized organization that evolved in response to the opportunities created by the new fashion industry: the multidesigner outlet (MDO). As the name suggests, these were stores that showcased and sold the creations of several designers under one roof. The first Indian MDO, Ensemble, was set up in Mumbai in 1987 by one of the earliest Indian designers, Tarun Tahiliani. He returned from a stay in the United States and, observing the emergence of the earliest fashion designers in India, perceived an opportunity for a store that would serve as a platform for designers and customers that would enable them to gain access to each other. This founder soon left the management of the store to his sister, Tina, while he pursued his real interest, which was designing apparel. Then, in 1989 and 1990, two more MDOs were founded, in New Delhi and Bangalore. Gradually, as organized retail expanded in India, larger stores installed sections of designer creations as well.

The Fashion Design Council of India. By 2005, the fashion industry had become institutionalized and counted over two hundred designers who were official members of the industry trade association. The Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI) was established in New Delhi in 1999 by seven designers and one businessman (a relative of one of the designers). The Council was modeled on the Chambre syndicale de la haute couture, in Paris, and the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), in New York, with a mission to lobby for the fashion industry, professionalize the industry, and promote Indian fashion globally. One of FDCI's first steps was initiating an annual Fashion Week, during which Indian designers present their seasonal collections in New Delhi, the capital of India. The Fashion Weeks in India were organized with the help of IMG, the international events-management and media firm that had operated New York Fashion Week for several years. Fashion Week in India made the industry

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52 These stores were similar to department stores in the U.S., but early MDOs did not have departments other than those for apparel. Even in 2005, most MDOs had only one shelf devoted to accessories, such as bags or jewelry, in the entire store.


55 FDCI Articles of Incorporation and Memorandum, FDCI archives, New Delhi, India.

56 The FDCI started with one Fashion Week a year in 2000. In 2006, however, the FDCI began to organize two Fashion Weeks to coincide with the global fashion calendar (the Fall–Winter collections were presented in February–March, and the Spring collections in September (see www.fdci.org/Events/). These events were held in New Delhi.
more efficient by consolidating the fashion shows previously organized by individual designers at separate times and in scattered locations. The move was particularly helpful to store buyers, as it improved their access to multiple collections.

By 2005, twenty years after the first designers had emerged, the fashion industry in India was starting to look more like the industries in the other fashion centers of the world. It was largely concentrated in New Delhi, a fashion center that was home to the full range of fashion professionals—designers, magazine editors, and fashion writers—and was supported by an infrastructure made up of training institutes, retailers, and fashion intermediaries. The size of the sector was estimated at INR 1.35 billion ($27 million) in 2001 and is expected to grow to between INR 10 billion and INR 18 billion by 2015. The media coverage of the industry was another indication that it had become consolidated and institutionalized. For instance, the number of articles on fashion in Femina increased from four in 1985 to sixty-five in 2005, and advertisements for designer clothing, which were absent from the magazine until 1992, made up 5 percent of all its advertisements in 2005. Ten percent of the magazine's total ad pages was devoted to designer advertisements. While only one designer was mentioned by name in Femina in 1985 (among all twenty-four issues), 127 unique names were mentioned in 2005.

The industry had not merely grown; it had also gained recognition among consumers and had constructed a coherent identity. Indian fashion designers were known for their heavily embellished, opulent, and lavish traditional-style Indian garments, a reputation that stemmed largely from one segment of the industry—"wedding wear and traditional functional" clothes—that consisted of heavily decorated traditional clothing. Although these garments were unique to India, and thus were not identified as a meaningful market segment in the global fashion industry, they accounted for more than 70 percent of Indian designers' revenues. Globally too, Indian design had come to be associated with a traditional Indian look.

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57 Blaszczyk, Producing Fashion.
58 KPMG Industry Report.
59 On average, between 1985 and 1988, six articles on fashion were published each year in Femina, while fifty articles were published in each year between 2002 and 2005.
60 Interestingly, 1994 was the first year in which designers became "staples" in the magazine's coverage of fashion.
61 For instance, an article in the Economist stated that "85% of the sales at Delhi Fashion Week were to Indian buyers who like more traditional sub-continental styles." "India's Fashion Industry: Stepping Out," Economist, 3 Apr. 2008, 69.
The Early Designers: Challenges and Tactics

Like most entrepreneurs in a newly created industry, the early designers in India were faced with several social, cultural, and cognitive hurdles. Foremost among them was Indian women's tendency to dress conservatively; as a consequence, the designers were limited to innovating within existing styles. One designer, Aparna Chandra, said, "When I designed minimalist clothes, people did not understand that it was all about the cut, and it was difficult to explain it to them." Western-style clothing, when worn, was typically for everyday casual wear, and did not merit the kind of expenditure that designers' prices warranted. Therefore, customers continued to buy Western clothing manufactured as nondesigner brands.

Designers faced two related cognitive hurdles. Because people did not understand the value of a designer's input, they consequently did not consider that designers' high prices were justified. This problem was made more acute by customers' belief that because of the availability of beautiful textiles and embroidery, as well as tailors' services, they could obtain the same product on their own. The CEO of Ensemble recalled in an interview: "Women would walk into our store, look at one of the ensembles, and cost it out as if they had to get it tailored—say, two meters of fabric, tailoring, a certain amount of embroidery or beadwork would, they knew, cost them Rs. X—and demand to know why we had priced it so much higher!" Similarly, designers were perceived as not much more than "glorified tailors" in the early days, not only by customers but also by their friends and parents. One designer remembered, "I often had to struggle to explain to people that I was not a"

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63 In the pages that follow, the source of all direct quotes not attributed to articles from Femina is a set of interviews I conducted in 2006 (June to December). I conducted forty-four open-ended and semi-structured interviews of individuals who were part of the fashion industry (fashion designers), as well as individuals who were part of the broader field of the industry, engaged in related activities (faculty in fashion-design institutes, fashion journalists, trade associations, buyers, and retailers). Most interviews were conducted in person, although five of forty-four were conducted over the phone. I interviewed the three earliest fashion designers in India, as well as five of the youngest fashion designers. I interviewed seventeen designers and two nondesigner CEOs of fashion firms, seven members of the media, seven faculty members at fashion-design training institutions and three fashion historians, three buyers and retailers, three FDCI office-holders, one model and one organizer of Fashion Week in India. The interviews usually lasted between one and two hours, and all in-person interviews were recorded and transcribed later.

64 See, for example Wilhite, Consumption and the Transformation of Everyday Life, in which his interviewees talk about "casual clothes" when they mean Western-style clothing.

65 Interview with owner Tina Tahiliani, 21 July 2006.

tailor. People would bring fabric to me and want me to copy something [a movie-star was wearing] out of a magazine and make it for them.”

Related to the problem of justifying high prices was people’s reluctance to spend so much money on something as frivolous as clothing. The notion of paying a premium for clothes created by a designer did not align well with the quasi-socialist frame of thinking prevalent in India at the time. The first director general of NIFT, Rathi Vinay Jha, explained, “In 1990, people questioned the government’s support of such an ‘elitist’ institution since fashion was seen as being accessible only to the privileged few.”

The early designers in India therefore focused on designing ornate, heavily embellished Indian-style clothing. This tactic helped them to achieve several goals and to overcome the hurdles they faced. First, customers liked such garments better than Western designs. Second, creating Indian-style clothing allowed the designers to use luxurious traditional Indian textiles and to attach various kinds of traditional embellishments to them, such as beads, gold thread and sequins, without hurting the design consistency, or “look,” of the garment. Moreover, these decorative elements helped to differentiate the new styles from available alternatives, such as clothing stitched by tailors and wedding saris woven in a traditional manner. The ornate designs also clarified their value to customers. Although tailors had access to some embroiderers, their smaller scale and low prices did not permit them to provide the range of embellishments that designers were able to offer, and hand-woven saris typically did not feature any surface decorations. The look of garments created by designers was therefore quite different from what customers had been used to seeing and buying. Yet, because the garments were essentially traditional, Indian-style clothes, they were not so different or unfamiliar that customers would resist buying them.

Finally, this strategy helped designers to overcome customers’ resistance to their high prices. Women wore only traditional Indian clothing at weddings and other formal or festive occasions, and the heavy adornments on the garments created by designers conveyed the sense of opulence that was appropriate for weddings, which were occasions when customers were willing to spend large sums of money. Thus, designers tapped into a natural market of brides and closed bridal parties. As one designer noted, “Wedding clothes are what make money.” The layers of lavish decorations provided visible justification for the high

67 Interview with faculty member at NIFT Vandana Bhandari, July 2006.

68 A newspaper article in 2007 estimated the wedding industry (which would include not just clothing and jewelry, but also catering and decoration services, as well as location rentals) to be worth INR 1.25 trillion annually, growing at a rate of 25 percent per year. See Michael Boroian and Alix De Pois, India by Design: The Pursuit of Luxury and Fashion (Singapore, 2010), 88.
prices, while also ostentatiously signaling the garment’s “designer” provenance. As another designer clarified in an interview, “In India, nobody is going to pay a high price for innovative patterns; they will only pay for embroidery.” Another stressed the importance of the lavish and opulent designs: “Clients still want something that looks expensive” (emphasis in original).

Designers were aware that it was necessary to embellish clothes in order to acquire customers. Every time writers from _Femina_ tried to suggest that designers do more than rely on traditional silhouettes and layered embellishments, the designers declared that they had no choice but to stick with tradition.

In 1997 _Femina_ published an article that described a designer’s failed attempt to subvert prevailing practices in the industry:

> You take a collection to a store and the first thing they ask you is how much embroidery you have done,” laments Delhi-based designer, Snehashish Ray. “Is the piece glittering enough? Will it outshine the piece next to it? Will the customer feel she’s paying for some ‘work,’ and not just a plain suit?\(^\text{69}\)

The traditional, ornamental look was easily accepted by customers.\(^\text{70}\) More important, however, was that Indian designers’ use of traditional textiles and craft techniques enabled them to claim that they were helping to preserve the Indian heritage of dyeing skills and rural crafts. Pioneering designer Ritu Kumar said, “The Indian fashion industry is essentially a craft-based industry and the craftsmen are integral to the industry. My whole interest has been that we should not lose our craft identity.”\(^\text{71}\) The power of this claim came from the fact that it was not only aligned with the official emphasis on craft preservation but that it also presumably helped to justify wearing ornate clothes at a time of national emphasis on egalitarianism and austerity. Like the claim made by NIFT, it probably mitigated the adverse publicity that greeted people wearing these clothes, who were perceived as elitist.

The notion that Indian textiles and traditional crafts were both unique and integral to high-end fashion was deeply rooted and widespread, and it enjoyed particular currency within the government.\(^\text{72}\) For

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\(^{69}\) _Femina_, 1 June 1997.

\(^{70}\) While these clothes were not innovative, they were “quoting from past clothing styles” and can therefore be characterized as fashion. See Ulrich Lehmann, _Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity_ (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

\(^{71}\) Interview with designer Ritu Kumar, 7 July 2006.

\(^{72}\) For instance, the All India Handicraft Board was established in 1952 to protect and promote the Indian handloom sector and revive broader public interest in the traditional crafts of India. Prominent leaders of this government-sponsored movement included Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jaykar, and Indira Gandhi. See Bhachu, _Dangerous Designs_, 74. Also Tarlo, _Clothing Matters_.
instance, in 1970, Fashion Group International, a New York–based not-for-profit organization, announced that it was organizing an Indian fashion show in New York. At the time, there were no formal fashion designers in India. Unfazed, the Ministry of Textiles and Handlooms gathered together a group of bureaucrats and models who traveled to New York to participate in the show. Their exhibit featured traditional Indian clothing. On display was not fashion, but the rich and diverse textile crafts of India. This is borne out by the transcript of the show’s accompanying commentary, which described the fabric and embroidery of each garment in great detail. As late as 1998, the Indian Ministry of Textiles assigned designers to individual weavers’ cooperatives to create items for display at European trade fairs. The government’s belief that India’s textile heritage was an integral aspect of Indian fashion was also reflected in the fact that NIFT was set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Textiles, rather than the supervision of the Indian Ministry of Human Resources and Education, which oversees institutions of higher education (like the Indian Institutes of Technology). Moreover, NIFT’s mandate was not only to help India’s apparel export industry, but also to protect and promote the country’s handicrafts. For instance, NIFT faculty member Vandana Bhandari, who had been studying a dying craft technique, danke ka kaam, hoped that fashion designers would become the force behind preserving the skill. She believed that Indian designers, with their predilection for luxurious clothes, could adopt the technique, which involved sewing thin, small pieces of gold foil onto the clothing they designed, thereby aiding the technique’s preservation. Accordingly, she embarked on a campaign to market the craft to designers.

The notion that Indian textiles and crafts were linked to fashion became more broadly popular. In 1986, when Femina asked a few designers what their advice to new designers would be, the answer was, “Try to revive traditional blocks and patterns.” The craft-conservation frame remained in force at least until 1998, when Femina published an article that addressed the question of what was unique about Indian fashion:

>What sets an Indian creation apart? The reflection of India’s vast heritage of arts and crafts. Many of today’s top-notch designers incorporate traditional arts creating a distinct identity for themselves. And, in the process, help to conserve traditional Indian craftsmanship.

75 Interview with Vandana Bhandari, July 2006.
In some cases, no distinction was made between fashion and traditional textiles with their embroideries and embellishments; Ritu Kumar said, “Fashion is not new to India. It is a thousand year old industry.” She was, of course, referring to the ancient trade in textiles between India and other civilizations. Anu Iyer, editor of Couture Asia, reiterated that sentiment: “This is not a new industry, since textiles and craftsmanship are [originally] from here [India].” Most designers too believed that the use of traditional textiles and embellishments was their way of distinguishing themselves as Indian designers, and that it was their unique selling point. The link between Indian fashion and traditional textiles was also solidified in the mission statement of the FDCI, which noted that one of the goals of the Council was “to foster the growth of the Indian fashion industry with the support of the Ministry of Textiles.” The craft-preservation claim of the designers thus resonated both with a general belief in the importance of traditional textiles and crafts and with widespread acceptance of the link between fashion and traditional textiles and crafts. Although creating traditional-style garments was advantageous to designers, given customer preferences and the positive image of craft preservation, the success of this strategy also trapped Indian designers. Incorporating traditional Indian textiles and crafts into the garments designers created soon came to be expected of them, regarded almost as a duty. An article in Femina in 1994 about a fashion show held in China in the same year as part of the Festival of India celebrations excoriated an Indian designer who dared to break from this mold:

Suneet Varma decided to be different. Abandoning India as an inspirational force, he proclaimed his passion for Greek culture in his ensembles . . . . I would have accepted this better from a designer working in a lesser country, which has insignificant art and culture, but for an Indian designer to totally ignore India—when he was required to show its essence—is sacrilege.

There was thus great pressure on Indian designers from both customers and the fashion press to create traditional garments, and to express their allegiance to Indian heritage and crafts in both their statements and designs. This was the case even for designers who participated in fashion shows or apparel trade shows in Western markets. In 1995, Wendell Rodricks, the first Indian designer invited to participate in the Igedo Fashion Fair in Dusseldorf, commented, “We must strive to

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77 Sengupta, Indian Fashion, “Introduction.”
79 Femina, 8 Sept. 1994.
preserve and enhance our Indian ethnicity, and not get deluged by the wave of Western styling.\textsuperscript{80}

It should be noted that these designers were aware of the inherent paradox in their claim to have “designed” a garment that was not much different in silhouette and shape from traditional incarnations, and that used traditional prints, weaves, and embroideries. To overcome this dissonance between tradition and novelty, they adopted one of two stances. Some designers justified their value and inputs by stressing that even established fashion designers in Western countries did not alter the basic structure of a garment type from year to year. “After all, a shirt is a shirt. You can’t have three sleeves in a shirt. All you can change is the fit, maybe the number and style of buttons, and the fabric. And that’s what we do with the lehenga-choli.”\textsuperscript{81}

Alternatively, some designers emphasized that they often suggested novel patterns to weavers, who were, naturally, mired in tradition and therefore unwilling to experiment with more modern designs and weaves. The designer duo Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, for instance, is credited with having introduced bold new stitches and designs in a traditional form of embroidery, called chikan.\textsuperscript{82} Another designer told me, “The weavers do the same thing over and over again . . . the same old paisley in a Benarasi [a particular style of silk-weaving]. I tell my weavers to add new motifs that I think of. So, the Benarasi silk that I offer my customers is not something they will get anywhere else.”

Thus, designers in India were aware of the limitations of the tactics they had adopted, and they knowingly undertook their decisions. Several of the early fashion designers in India had been trained in New York, Paris, and London and had served apprenticeships in Western fashion houses, such as Donna Karan. They were thus well versed in creating Western-style silhouettes and clothing. Their choice of design and style was therefore not driven by any capability limitations, but by the social, cultural, and economic context in which they had to do business.

The Identity of Indian Fashion

Traditional-style clothing with heavy embellishments came to signify the Indian fashion industry. The output of Indian designers was widely recognizable by its opulence. This image of Indian fashion design was broadly disseminated through photographs in magazines, and

\textsuperscript{80} “Designing for Dusseldorf,” \textit{Femina}, 8 Nov. 1995.
\textsuperscript{81} Interview with designer and CEO of design house Sanjay Kapoor, 23 Nov. 2006.
\textsuperscript{82} Sengupta, \textit{Indian Fashion}. 
The Indian Fashion Industry / 363

it gained wide acceptance. Consequently, the identity of Indian fashion became imprinted with this look. Retailers in India began to sell knock-offs of Indian-style clothing under the label “Designerwear.” The items looked like the designer products that were decorated with heavy embroidery or other embellishments. Technically, these clothes were “wedding wear,” or “formal wear,” but because the word “designer” had cachet, and because clothing created by designers was expected to look a certain way, the term “designerwear” became a shorthand to indicate formal clothing.

The strength, pervasiveness, and broad acceptance of the traditionally based identity established by early designers has led to frustrations for more recent Indian designers, who feel pressured to create traditional-style garments, even though their own design sensibilities tend toward structural innovations and Western styles. For instance, one designer told me, “I never wanted to make [ornamented] ‘costumes’ and this has been a disadvantage to me, both financially, as well as in terms of gaining legitimacy and credibility.” Another designer, Aparna Chandra, reiterated the financial disadvantages of designing clothes that looked different from what had become the accepted norm: “Embellished Indian clothes are something I cannot design. Yes, of course, I will never sell [i.e., make money] as much as those who can.” Another young, newly established designer, Varun Bahl, said, “In fact, I am planning to stop designing Western wear for the Indian market since people here don’t understand my price points for simple daily wear.”

Beginning with British designer Zandra Rhodes’s highly publicized fascination with, and deconstruction of, the Indian sari in 1990, a wave of Western designers, such as John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, and Jean-Paul Gaultier, incorporated Indian embroideries and garments in their creations. This trend apparently further strengthened Indian designers’ conviction that the Indian look was likely to appeal to Western audiences. Thus, for example, Femina asserted in 2000, “India has been storming international catwalks for some time now. Whether in terms of textiles, drapes, or embroidery, the West had turned to the East for inspiration and made us realize that there was something we were doing right.”

At the same time however, there was a sense among Indian designers that Western designers were not able to evaluate Indian embroidery properly, with the result that the embroidery they used for their confections was not only inferior to what the Indian designers used but was also poorly showcased. This belief only strengthened the notion

among Indian designers that their own textiles and crafts represented a comparative advantage and were not to be given up or trifled with.

The entry of Western designer brands into the Indian market, following a regulatory change that permitted single-brand foreign retailers to operate in India, in some ways strengthened Indian designers’ preoccupation with traditional clothing. They believed that focusing on Indian clothes would help them to compete with Westerners, for, as one designer pointed out, “After all, Armani cannot do a sari.” Designers in India also believed that it was necessary to continue producing Indian-looking garments because “[their design represented] a unique feature; designers need to maintain it, in order to not lose out in the battle with foreign brands.”

The same look was carried beyond Indian borders, and like the Japanese designers who gained legitimacy from their participation in Paris Fashion Week, acceptance of their designs outside the country strengthened the Indian designers’ sense of identity. The first major move beyond Indian borders occurred when an early Indian designer opened a store in London in 1996, after having operated a store-within-a-store in Galeries La Fayette in Paris for some years. Femina covered its opening, calling the store “a taste of India, outside India,” and “a spot where Londoners can now go to get their India fix.”

This store catered largely to Indians living in the U.K. and to the small group of non-Indians who liked and wore Indian-style clothing. The spread of Indian fashion beyond India continued with Indian designers’ participation in fashion shows in Milan and Paris in the late 1990s. Although Femina did not document all these shows, it is clear from its coverage of a few of them that the designers largely presented Indian-style clothing, made from traditional Indian patterns and embellished with embroidery and traditional handwork. The articles in Femina also imply that the mostly Western audiences at these shows were duly impressed by the detailed craftsmanship and rich textiles that India had to offer the world of fashion. For instance, Femina’s coverage of designer Suneet Varma’s show during couture week in Rome described his collection as “filled with vibrant colors, fabrics, and an assortment of Indian embellishments: badla, stonework, aari, mirror embroidery, 3D embroidery, and resham embellishments.” The review went on to say that the Italians “loved the saris he showed, although they would have preferred them to be permanently pleated.”

Thus, Kawamura, The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion.

The market for Indian fashion designers was largely confined to India until the Fashion Weeks started, when buyers from stores in the U.S., France, and the U.K. as well as the Middle East attended; the bulk of sales volume nevertheless came from India. See Bhachu, Dangerous Designs, 68–82.

these fashion shows were viewed and used as opportunities to showcase India and its traditional textiles and crafts. In so doing, Indian designers presented the kind of clothes they thought Western audiences expected to see. Even more so than in India, Indian designers felt the need to emphasize their craft- and textile-based roots in order to differentiate themselves from Western designers. As Lisa Skov found in her study of designers in Hong Kong, and Antonia Finnane uncovered in her study of designers in China, Indian designers too believed that their designs had to look overtly Indian when displayed in shows abroad. Even though Indian designers included Western styles in their presentations abroad, they stressed their decorations and rich textiles because they believed these features worked to their advantage.

By 2002, when reviewing shows at the Fashion Week in Delhi, Femina reported mainly on the small fraction of clothes that did not conform to the standard look in the industry, stating: “And then of course, there was the bridal stuff, but we don’t really need to talk about that. Everyone knows that look.” And in 2003, the bridal lehengas in a collection were referred to as “trademark” garments. The look and identity were known and expected globally too; a New York Times review of Indian designer Sabyasachi Mukherji’s first show in New York, in September 2006, found it necessary to point out, “There are no saris.”

There were good reasons for the tactics that were adopted by the early designers and that led to the identity the industry eventually acquired. However, at the same time, this identity creates challenges for Indian designers who wish to make inroads into global fashion. Primary among these challenges is the balance they must strike between their Indian identity and their global ambitions. The distinctive look they have created thus places them in a paradoxical situation. If they continue to design overtly Indian clothes, they will certainly not be taken seriously in the international fashion scene. As fashion critic Suzy Menkes writes, “The ethnic look is so tough to carry off (unless it comes through a high-fashion filter like John Galliano’s).” They are aware that in order to be taken seriously on the global stage they must be perceived as capable of pushing the envelope in design innovations and creativity. Originally a Western phenomenon, fashion defines innovation and creativity in terms of Western-style clothing.

hand, these designers produce clothes that are entirely Western in appearance, they risk losing their core customers and giving up what is widely perceived as their comparative advantage. Nevertheless, most Indian designers whom I interviewed wanted to believe that they could earn recognition as well as revenues by bringing an “Indian sensibility and aesthetic to Western-style garments.” Whether that will happen remains to be seen.

Conclusion

While a fashion industry can emerge anywhere in the world, its particular structure and identity is a function of early entrepreneurs’ interactions with their culture and context. Although Indian designers have presented collections in Paris and New York, they face an inherent tension between being Indian and operating globally. Too heavy a reliance on Indian textiles and embellishments would make them seem provincial. On the other hand, if they create clothing styles that are entirely Western, they would risk losing their distinctive strengths as well as their main customers. In order to compete on the global stage, Indian designers therefore will have to figure out a way to overcome the limitations imposed by their identity.

Since the 1990s, the demand for garments that are less overtly Indian and more in tune with modern styles has been growing within India. In addition to the large wave of Indian diaspora to Western countries, Indians have also experienced greater exposure to the outside world following regulatory changes in 1991 that explicitly reversed previous restrictive business policies and opened the Indian economy to the world, ushering in an era of fast-paced economic development and a growing consumerist middle class. Indian society and values are becoming increasingly Westernized. In fact, contributors to Femina have begun to adopt a more Western gauge when evaluating Indian fashion and to endorse Western fashion patterns characterized by innovations in cut and style. The more Westernized outlook taking hold in India has created opportunities for younger designers to create different styles of garments and yet still be perceived as legitimately Indian. While the primary identification of the country’s fashion industry with opulent, highly decorative garments still prevails, entrepreneurs in India may have an opportunity to transform the country’s identity.

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